

# What to do with

**L**arge eyes peer with curiosity out from a small, fuzzy ball of fur. Maybe the little cub seems friendly, seems helpless, seems orphaned. But before you touch it - DON'T! That

*By Alexia Retallack*

seemingly helpless, furry creature may not be an orphan at all, and its 300-pound mother may be foraging nearby. The reaction of a sow bear to a human coming between her and her cub can mean serious injury to the human whether the interference with the cub is intentional or accidental.

Still, rare occasions exist in which bear cubs have been known to be orphaned. In 1996, the California Department of Fish and Game (DFG) instituted a policy for tending to orphan bear cubs with the intent of returning them to the wild.

DFG's policy calls for placing orphaned bear cubs under 25 pounds with certified rehabilitation facilities. Cubs at 25 pounds or less are guaranteed to be young of the year, and still small enough to be dependent. Currently, only one facility, located in northern California, has met the requirements necessary to be certified for rehabilitating bear cubs. Another facility is currently under construction in Lake Arrowhead and is expected to be operational sometime in 2003. When a California facility is not available, DFG has made arrangements with a facility in Idaho to take the orphaned cubs. DFG places on average three cubs per year under the orphan bear policy.

To meet certification requirements for rehabbing orphan bear cubs, a facility must construct special enclosures with a minimum of 100 square feet per cub. There are requirements for the floor, for the walls, for the gates, for the den and for the perimeter fence. All of the requirements focus on providing enough living space for the bear and safety for it and its human attendants.

The costs can run between \$100,000 and \$150,000 for a single, moderate enclosure that can accommodate two cubs. In addition to construction needs like foundation, cement and chain link, the facility needs electricity and a



*DFG photo by Bob Stafford*

**Above, female in den with young cub. The cubs are born while the sow is hibernating.**

**Right, cub learns how to climb a tree. Just because the cub appears alone does not mean that its mother has abandoned it. She may be foraging nearby. Getting between a sow and her cub or near her cub is dangerous.**

**Far right, for rehabilitation of a cub to succeed, it requires restricting all human contact with the bear. Only trained and certified individuals and facilities should attempt it.**



*Photo © Mike Fontaine*



# Orphaned bears

surveillance system. The surveillance system allows personnel to monitor the cubs in the enclosure without making direct contact, including visual. In addition, because most rehabilitation facilities are located far from urban centers in prime bear habitat, an external monitoring system is necessary to ensure the safety of the facility from wild animals outside of the facility.

The rehabilitation process is long and exacting, and every effort must be made to teach the bear cub the skills it will need to survive in the wild without it imprinting upon humans. DFG considers the rehabilitation process to be successful if the bear is returned to the wild AND survives to reproduce, taking its place as a contributing member of the California bear population. Rehabilitation costs can run between \$50,000 and \$75,000 annually in food, staffing, facility upkeep and care :expensive even with donated food and volunteer assistance.

During the first part of rehabilitation, the cubs require a special formula. Once weaned, they require exposure to natural foods like grubs, berries and acorns in addition to the provided vegetables and the occasional meat. Volunteers can spend 30 to 50 hours per month scavenging the local wildlands for these items. A rehabilitation facility must be staffed 24 hours per day, seven days per week - volunteers are not enough. At a minimum a part-time staff is required. In addition, a veterinarian trained to DFG standards in animal handling and restraint must be available to provide medical care as needed.

The success of the orphaned bear program has been difficult to ascertain. DFG has released and monitored only a few rehabilitated orphaned bears in northern California and Yosemite National Park. When first returned to the wild, rehabilitated bears tend to be heavier with a greater store of body fat than their wild counterparts which gives them an edge for the winter. DFG looks for good habitat in which to release the bears to give them the best chance of survival, but monitoring the bears and observing how those bears interact with the rest of the population is nearly impossible.

Though the bears wear radio collars,



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monitoring requires a great deal of time and dedication of resources. DFG released three rehabbed bears in the Truckee and Foresthill areas a few years ago. One bear was killed on I-80 within days of release, another was alive after one year, and there was no information on the third.

Discussion has been raised about using global positioning (GPS) collars on the rehabilitated bears because the monitoring is conducted through satellites rather than through ground surveillance. The signal would be sent and recorded regularly, giving DFG a daily trace of movement. Through a partnership that included donated GPS collars, DFG has tracked specific mountain lions, elk and bighorn sheep as

part of studies which provided tremendous information. The collars have a mortality signal (animal stops moving for a designated period of time indicating it is deceased or the collar has fallen off). However, unlike mountain lions and other large mammals, bears have a sedentary period which would require adapting the collars to a bear's hibernation cycle to be useful.

DFG will continue the orphaned bear rehabilitation process and efforts at monitoring released cubs. As DFG gains more knowledge through studies and observations, it expects to improve its programs. 🐻

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